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ABSTRACT

Several factors have contributed to the increased demand for corporate speechwriters, including the consumer and environmental movements, the economy, foreign competition, and a negative public attitude toward business. Corporate speeches serve a variety of purposes: promoting a corporation within a business community, providing information on specific issues that affect particular industries or companies, and advancing individual careers. Chief executive officers frequently speak at business conventions or college convocations but also spend a good deal of time addressing internal audiences. Most companies hire someone to write specifically for these occasions, although some may turn to outside public relations counsel or to free lancers. In a few instances, the speech may be written by the executive or by his or her assistant. In a survey of communication specialists in 128 Fortune 500 companies, only one had a degree in speech, compared to 42 in journalism, 32 in English, and 13 in history or political science. This may be because speechwriting is not an entry level job. But as corporate speechwriting becomes an established career field, more and more speech majors will begin filling corporate speechwriting positions. (HTH)

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SPEECHWRITING: THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE

by

Martha Stout Kessler

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by Martha Stout Kessler

Paper Delivered at the 1983 Speech Communication Association Convention, Washington, D.C.

According to CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS REPORT, the demand for corporate speech writers increased about 30% a year from 1975 to 1980.[1] This paper will discuss:

1) why this phenomenon has taken place,

2) what such positions entail,

3) who is filling the positions, and

4) their educational background.

This report is based, in part, on a survey of the work of communication specialists in Fortune 500 companies which I completed in 1980,[2] and on lengthy personal interviews which I conducted in September and October, 1983, with speechwriters at six major corporations including America's largest utility, second largest insurance company, second largest diversified service company, sixth largest diversified financial company, ninth largest bank and twenty-second largest manufacturing company.

To understand why there is an increased demand for corporate speechwriters, one has to understand why business executives, particularly chief executive officers, are giving so many speeches. A look at the history of the past two decades provides the answer:

1) the consumer movement,

2) the environmental movement,

3) government regulation and deregulation,

4) increased competition from abroad,

5) recession and inflation,

6) public lack of confidence in and/or antimosity toward business.

All of these factors have presented challenges that CEOs feel they cannot ignore. A survey of CEOs by management recruiters Russell Reynolds, Inc. reports that today "CEOs see their jobs as ... management of the planning process, development of management talent, and dealing with external audiences such as investors, the press and the communities in which they operate."[3] Helen McLane, vice-president of Heidrich and Struggles, management consultants who specialize in communication, says that at many corporations the CEO spends half his time on public affairs matters.[4]

In addition, America's current concern with economic matters has resulted in business speakers being in top demand on the lecture circuit. The NEW YORK TIMES reports that "at the top of today's lecture popularity list are prominent--sometimes controversial--names associated with American industry such as ... Lee Iacocco and William Agee."[5] If one accepts the management maxim that the most valuable thing an executive has is time, then the need for people to assist them in their public speaking activities is apparent.

Let's examine these activities and the reasons for them in a little more detail. First, a large number of CEO's speeches

are given to promote their corporation within the business community. As one speechwriter put it, the CEO is the company's chief lobbyist. Every speechwriter I talked with had a story about that very important speech they had to write when their boss appeared before the Society of Financial Analysts. The lead article in the October 19, 1983 issue of the WALL STREET JOURNAL described the speaking activities of just one group of CEOs--the heads of the telephone companies spun off from ATT--who were "stumping the country in a feverish rivalry for investor dollars."[6]

A second category of speeches are those relating to specific issues that affect particular industries or companies. One veteran writer said that he began to suspect that something was up in the energy field when, in the early 1970's, he received numerous inquiries from head-hunters (recruiters) about going to work for oil companies. A content analysis of 540 speeches given by CEOs in 1979 revealed that the most often addressed topic was government regulation.[7]

A third reason for speechmaking by CEOs is the promotion of self. One president, who it is generally agreed has his sights set on a loftier position in his corporate conglomerate, declared that his speechwriter was more important to him than his wife or his chairman because the speechwriter had to make him look good in front of very critical audiences. It used to be said of the famous, recently retired chairman of one of America's biggest banks, that speeches were so important to him and he had to give them so often that he carried a speechwriter around in

his attache case.

As I indicatred before, an increasing number of speeches are being given by CEOs who are invited to address business conventions, college convocations, etc. Although executives such as Agee and William Simon typically earn between $10,000 and $15,000 for each appearance, plus expenses including airfare, limosines, and even bodyguards, most say they can accept only about 25% of the invitations they receive.[8]

Last, but certainly not least in terms of importance, CEOs spend a good deal of time addressing internal audiences--their own executives, managers and employees. Iacocco of Chrysler, who last year received 2,500 invitations to speak to outside audiences, accepted only 30.[9] But that doesn't mean he isn't speaking. He speaks at Chrysler functions. And the importance he places on this activity may be indicated by the six figure salary he is reputed to pay his speechwriter. Indeed the persuasive speaking tasks facing some CEOs are so enormous that they could serve as classic examples of hostile audience situations. Consider the tasks of the presidents of several of America's airlines who are trying to convince their employees to take major pay cuts.

What I've just described can serve as a picture of what the position of corporate speechwriter entails--writing speeches for these kinds of occasions. While for many, that is their sole job, others have additional duties which include writing: annual reports, testimony for government committees, magazine articles to be published under the CEO's name, film and video scripts,

pamphlets, letters, etc. The one thing that no speechwriter I interviewed was called upon to do, however, was give advice or coach in how to deliver a speech. Two CEOs had personal "speech coaches" and the other four corporations retained the services of a communication consulting firm.

Who fills the position of speechwriter? In the majority of companies it is a corporate employee hired specifically to write speeches and possibly other kinds of communications. Sometimes, however, a corporation may not be able to find someone who can not only write speeches, but who can think like top management. Gulf and Western looked for over a year for someone to write speeches for their now-deceased chairman, Charles Bludhorn, and finally gave up.[10] In such cases the speechwriting assignment may be given to someone in the public affairs or public relations department who is principally engaged in other activities. (One interviewee declared that corporations are notorious for believing that <u>anyone</u> can write a speech.)

Others may turn to their outside public relations counsel. One writer I interviewed spent many years as a trouble-shooter--or trouble-writer. He would be called in at the last minute to write the speech the in-house writers had not been able to produce.

Another source for speechwriting is free-lancers. One writer did not get his current job until he had spent several years free-lancing and had built up a portfolio to demonstrate his ability. From the corporate point of view there may be advantages to using free-lancers. They may provide a fresh point

of view. The company may avoid internal difficulties; no department head is going to get a nose out of joint because one of his or her staff is working directly with the CEO. In addition, it provides the possibility for using people with special expertise in a given topic.

Finally, in a very few instances, the job of speechwriter is filled by the CEO's alter-ego--assistant--or by the CEO himself. The corporate communication department at one company I visited was a little dismayed because their famous new president was not calling upon them to write his speeches. Their disappointment was tempered, however. by recalling their experience with his almost equally famous predecessor who used the same business school joke to begin every speech. The president asked the department to come up with a new joke. They spent days on the project and came up with a 200 page volume. The CEO rejected them all, and used the same old joke.

Since the title of this program is the EDUCATION OF THE SPEECH WRITER, I would like to close by giving a profile of the educational background of those whom I surveyed and interviewed. In the survey of communication specialists in 128 Fortune 500 companies,[11] only one had a degree in speech, compared to 42 journalism majors, 32 English majors,and 13 history/political science majors. Of the speechwriters I interviewed, three were journalism majors, two had PhDs in history, one had an MA in history, one had an MA in political science, one had a BA in political science and one had a BA in English. <u>All</u> had expericence in <u>journalism</u>, either part-time in college and/or

full-time after graduation. Not only did none have a degree in speech, only four had ever taken a speech course. Two said they didn't remember anything about it, one said it was a complete waste of time, and the fourth was absolutely petrified by the course. One of the journalism majors reported that courses he took in radio and television journalism were particularly helpful in his current job, and the two PhDs in history said that the experience of preparing and delivering lectures when they were college teachers had helped them in speechwriting. Only one had taken any subsequent speech course--one offered by the American Management Association--and he did not consider it to be very helpful.

In conclusion, it is clear that speechwriting for corporations is an established career field. However, at this time, it is not one filled by speech majors. This is due in part to the fact that the position of speechwriter is not an entry-level job. As more speech majors embark upon careers in business, we may see more of them filling speechwriting positions in the future.

FOOTNOTES

[1] CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS REPORT, Vol. 11, #1 (January, 1980), p. 5.

[2] Kessler, Martha Stout, "Communicating Within and Without: the Work of Communication Specialists in American Corporations," THE ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNICATION ADMINISTRATION BULLETIN, January, 1981, pp. 45-50.

[3] NEW YORK TIMES. August 31, 1983, p. D15.

[4] CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS REPORT, p 5.

[5] NEW YORK TIMES, September 11, 1983, p. F15.

[6] WALL STREET JOURNAL, October 19,. 1983, p. 1.

[7] Myers, Robert J. and Martha Stout Kessler, "Business Speaks: A Study of the Public Speaking of America's Corporate Leaders," THE JOURNAL OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION, Spring, 1980, pp. 5-17.

[8] NEW YORK TIMES, September 11, 1983, p. F15.

[9] Ibid.

[10] CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS REPORT, p. 5.

[11] Kessler, p. 46.